

Astonishing Confessions of Bogus Nobleman



Photograph of the Baroness Vetsera taken just before she met and fascinated the Crown Prince Rudolph.

"Count Gregory," Impostor, Adventurer and

THE imperial court of the Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria was the proudest court of all Europe—an unbroken line of eighteen nobles on both sides of the family ancestry was required for social recognition at Vienna.

Among the servants in the palace and in the imperial stables was young Bernard Francis Seraph Gruenebaum, the son of one of the Emperor's household servants. His position as servant at the palace gave the boy opportunity to see and study the members of the royal family and the nobles and the great ladies of the court.

And later, as a petty officer in a fashionable regiment of Hussars, young Gruenebaum became the personal servant of a royal prince and half a dozen dashing and unscrupulous noblemen. In the capacity of confidential valet the young man shared the secrets of the most profligate and immoral men and women of the Austrian aristocracy. He attended them at their debaucheries, looked on at their ruinous card games, carried secret messages to the gay wives of unsuspecting husbands, arranged rendezvous and learned a hundred ways by which a bankrupt spendthrift may raise money.

Fascinated by the gay life of his noble masters, young Gruenebaum himself indulged in flirtations, intrigues, gambling, and soon had a record of scandal and debts almost worthy of titled nobility. But he was without ancestry or influence and he was thrown out of the army in disgrace.

Gruenebaum had studied the habits, the deportment and the little mannerisms of the great people he had been long and intimately associated with. He had pressed hundreds of suits of clothes and polished countless shoes and swords and saddles. He had practiced with his master's gloves and stick and monocle—he had acquired the habit of a boutonniere on his evenings out.

But one thing was lacking—a title. With all the acquired tricks and mannerisms of nobility—even to proficiency in feminine intrigues and skill in procuring money, why should he not succeed as well as a real nobleman if he only had a title and could transfer his scene of adventure to a land where a bogus title would not be discovered?

At the age of twenty-two, with a neatly engraved card reading "Baron Gruenebaum," with monocle, boutonniere and a valet, he made his appearance in London. His career at the most fashionable clubs, his meeting and swindling many of the most prominent of English titled nobility, his card games with the Prince of Wales will be told in detail later.

In England the "Baron" met many Americans, and their adoration led him to make a trip to the United States to find a rich wife. With letters of introduction from his unsuspecting social acquaintances in London the adventurer found no difficulty in establishing himself in the most sacredly guarded circle of fashionable New York society, and he accomplished the remarkable achievement of becoming the guest of honor at

a reception given him by Mrs. William Astor, the acknowledged queen of "the 400."

But it required considerable funds to finance his social career and the fashionable American millionaires, and a careless little transaction about a forged check landed the "Baron Gruenebaum" in Blackwell Island prison for ten months. This unfortunate setback ended his career in New York for the time, and he returned to renew his conquest of London. To disentangle his name from the penitentiary record "Baron Gruenebaum" now promoted himself to a higher title and changed his visiting card to read "Count Gregory."

The details of the magnificent "Count Gregory's" exploits in London and in Paris will all be told in these pages.

But it is the story of the impostor's latest visit to America that is most extraordinary. For in spite of his earlier splurge in New York when Mrs. Astor, the social dictator, accepted him as "Baron Gruenebaum" and his sudden eclipse behind the prison walls of New York's famous penitentiary—in spite of all this, the audacious adventurer came back to America and managed to get into the very cream of select society "Count Gregory."

This time the Vanderbilts were his closest friends, and there is scarcely a prominent man or woman listed in the Social Register whom "Count" has not met or swindled. In fact, so well did this engaging bird succeed that he was welcomed in New York's most exclusive club as a central figure at the fashionable Madison Square Garden Horse Show, he entered his own string of horses at the Newport Horse Show competing with the Vanderbilts and other multi-millionaire sports and won fourteen prizes in one exhibition.

Indeed, so thoroughly well did this bogus aristocrat play his part that he was persuaded to act as one of the Horse Show judges, and American fashionables joyously accepted blue ribbons at his hand with deferential humility bowed to his rulings against their pets in ring.

Among other achievements the "Count" took on a rich American wife. The wedding, which made a "Countess" of this enraptured impostor, was one of the social events of the season in New York, and will be described with intimate details of the ridiculous courtship by the "Count" himself.

There is a humorous side to this, of course—this blind, unqualified adoration of the palace servant and stable boy because he aped the manners of the nobility and adorned himself with a bogus title. Put any phase of the adventurer's activities is more sinister. His wicked scheme to lure an exceptionally pretty young wife to a wanton career, so that "Count" might play his rich friends into her arms to be plucked for his own financial benefit, and her ruin and suicide—this is the blackest chapter of his career.

All this will be told with entire frankness, from week to week in these pages, by "Count" Gregory himself.

CHAPTER II.

By "Count" Bernard Francis Seraph Gregory

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I SAID last Sunday that I had lived by my wits for thirty years by victimizing my fashionable multi-millionaire friends of European and American high society. To live like a millionaire among millionaires required no small amount of money, and if I swindled and imposed upon my wealthy friends they were all well able to bear the financial burden and seemed well satisfied and rather proud, in most cases, of being allowed to bask in the sunshine of my agreeable presence and bogus title.

But there was one episode in my long and disreputable career, I said, which I sincerely repent. The ghostly and gloriously beautiful face of poor Alma Hayne still haunts me from her suicide's grave.

The ruin of Captain Hayne's charming wife, her sale into the bondage of sin, her awakening and her struggle to free herself from the New York millionaires who held her in bondage, her broken heart and her shocking end—all this I look back upon with sorrow and remorse.

I did not kill pretty Alma with my own hands, of course, as I pointed out, but the wicked scheme which I planned and the downward path upon which I set her exquisite feet led as surely to her destruction as if I had accomplished it with a poisoned dagger.

In the chapter last Sunday I explained that in my career of impostor, swindler and blackmailer there were ups and down of fortune, as there are in any business or profession. At times I was very flush with money, owned a stable and a string of valuable horses, had trainers, grooms, servants and thousands of dollars' worth of equipage.

I was able to hold my end up with multi-millionaires like the Vanderbilts and compete with them on equal terms at the fashionable horse shows and country club exhibitions, and my dinners, entertainments and coaching parties were equal to anything in the fashionable rich set. But there were other times when bad luck or ill fortune reduced me to financial extremities, when the proceeds of my last swindle had been exhausted, and the time and the opportunity for another coup did not seem quite ripe.

It was at such a moment, just before the great world war began, that I found myself extremely low in my bank balance. I had on my hand a very expensive stable and many valuable fancy horses, with the heavy cost of maintaining my uniformed trainers and grooms, harnesses, equipages, stable expenses and travelling expenses. I could not afford to sell my string and thus reveal my ragged financial condition to my rich friends.

It was late in the year 1913 that I took my string of pedigreed driving horses to the well-known fashionable horse show at Toronto, Canada. As usual, I won many of the blue ribbons, and my famous coach-and-six and my matchless tandems swept all the prizes.

The distinguished "Count Gregory" was lionized by the Canadian horse lovers, who had gathered from all over eastern Canada to exhibit at the Toronto show.



The Coat of Arms of Austria.

means for replenishing my purse. I looked over with great care the various exhibitors, who were men and women of large wealth, but did not seem to find a promising opportunity for a sufficiently large sum to be worth bothering about.

I was sitting in the golden hued lobby of the King Edward Hotel in Toronto one evening during the horse show week, when I was approached by a young man whom I had met, informally, during the afternoon at the show. I had forgotten him, of course, as he had been but one of many to congratulate me upon the winning of that afternoon's ribbons. However, he recalled himself to me and said he would like to repeat his congratulations, explaining that he belonged to a British artillery regiment and was a lover of fine horses. He gave me his card, which read:

"Captain George Osborne Hayne."

I knew some officers of the Horse Guards, and we were chatting familiarly in a few moments—even to the extent of a brandy and soda at the King Edward bar. We had discovered so many mutual acquaintances that I heartily agreed to his suggestion that perhaps I might like to meet Mrs. Hayne, who, he said, also had been born in London.

As we approached his door the captain asked me to overlook the modesty of their room. "I have nothing but my pay, you know," he explained, "and that is not coming now, since I have virtually resigned my commission. My wife does not like the military set at home, because we have been unable to hold our end up as well as we would like."

Mrs. Hayne proved to be a very pretty young woman, in whose eyes I saw a dormant cleverness which attracted me at once. She was quite appreciative at being presented to a "real Count."

Their room was, indeed, modest. It was one of the cheapest rooms in the hotel, shut out from the street by the walls of a court. I felt very sorry for the little lady. After some desultory conversation I asked her if she would not join me, with her husband, at a supper in the grill. She demurred, and her husband, drawing me aside, confided that while his wife would be delighted to be entertained by me, she really did not have a gown suitable for a supper in the grill room. As soon as I could I repeated the invitation, but substituted my own apartments for the grill room, tactfully urging Mrs. Hayne "not to change her gown, but to come down as she was."

I really was quite interested in the young woman. Her face seemed to have an Austrian cast, and there was a vague suggestion in her features of some one I had known. I remarked upon this, but we discovered no

mutual acquaintances in London and no possibilities of a former meeting.

It was a very jovial supper. We had wine and liqueurs repeatedly, and Mrs. Hayne enjoyed the occasion tremendously. She was a good conversationalist, much more lively than her rather stupid but worthy husband, and a bit inclined to innuendo.

During the evening Mrs. Hayne excused herself—frankly she admitted she felt that her nose needed a bit of powder, and asked if she might look into my bedroom. I escorted her to my dressing table. On my table there were several photographs, among them a framed picture of the Crown Prince Rudolph and Baroness Vetsera, as I had known them when I was the orderly for one of the Prince's officers in Austria.

This photograph, as my eyes fell upon it, explained the familiar resemblance I had caught in Mrs. Hayne's face. She looked very much like the unfortunate Baroness. She was about the same age as the Baroness had been when I saw her; she was of similar size, and her eyes were large and lustrous as had been those of the Baroness. I caught up the photograph and exclaimed:

"Now I know why I thought your face familiar—you are almost the picture of my one-time dear friend—the Baroness Vetsera—this is she."

"Oh, how interesting!" Mrs. Hayne cried. "You knew her—and I look like her—you must tell me all about her and about her death."

"My dear Mrs. Hayne, you ask me to reveal to you one of the sworn secrets of the royal court of Austria. The whole world knows that young Crown Prince Rudolph and his lady love, the Baroness Marie Vetsera, were found dead in the royal hunting lodge at Meyerling in Austria twenty years ago. A hundred different versions of that extraordinary tragedy of Emperor Francis Joseph's son have been told. Not one of these is true any more than is the official royal explanation that the future ruler of Austria-Hungary was accidentally shot while hunting."

"And you know the true story?" pursued Mrs. Hayne eagerly.

"Yes; I was present at the tragedy, but it is too long a story to tell you now."

Mrs. Hayne took the photograph of the unfortunate Baroness Vetsera from my bureau, brought it to the next room, and holding it up before her husband asked if he could see a resemblance between the Crown Prince's murdered sweetheart and herself.

"Why, my dear, this does indeed look enough like you for the Baroness to have been your own mother!" exclaimed Captain Hayne.

The conversation drifted off into other channels and Captain Hayne and his wife were much interested to hear my stories of life among the nobility, never doubting for a moment that I was of noble blood and never suspecting that my title of "Count" was a fictitious one.

Finally my guests departed, and Mrs. Hayne bade me a rather pathetic good-night, saying longingly:

"Ah, Count Gregory, what an interesting life you have lived! Wealth and association with people who are worth

while! How dearly I would love to live my life among the interesting men and women and places you know so well! Good-night."

That night I lay awake worrying about my financial condition. Again I turned over in my mind the various wealthy Canadians whom I had met at the Toronto horse show. I thought of my rich friends in New York, Alfred and Reginald Vanderbilt.

As I explained last week, I had made it a rule never to borrow money or impose upon the Vanderbilts. I must retain their friendship and confidence at all hazards, because they were the sponsors for my social position, and as long as I held their favor and confidence I could swindle and impose upon the little fish in the social pool who dearly love to associate with the Vanderbilts and their intimate friends.

Constantly during the night my thoughts turned upon Mrs. Hayne. I was, personally, much impressed with her youth, beauty, vivacity, amiability and adaptability. I wondered why so charming a woman with such possibilities for social success should have been doomed to the fate of marrying a poor though worthy British army officer. I recalled dozens of stupid, very plain women in American society who had managed to marry men of great wealth and social position. How much better would Mrs. Hayne grace the drawing room or the ballroom or the deck of a yacht of some of these New York multi-millionaire friends of mine than the women they had chosen!

And a bit of conversation came back to my mind several times during the night, when I had said to her, "You are very pretty, madame; you should have all the good things of the earth," and she had replied rather pensively: "You really think, then, Count Gregory, that my fortune is not commensurate with my face and my grace? In novels and in plays pretty women always are swimming in money if their clothes and jewels and automobiles and yachts are an indication. I have often wondered how they do it."

I pondered those words of Mrs. Hayne. I tried to get behind the words and satisfy myself as to just what Mrs. Hayne really meant.

Did Mrs. Hayne belong to the class of high-minded young women who realized that she was fitted for a higher sphere of existence, but, while regretting that the fullness of life was not for her, was content to suffer her disappointment and live out her life honorably as the faithful wife of a poor man?

Or, perhaps, Mrs. Hayne had thoughts in the back of her head which were only dimly reflected by those words of hers which had set me to thinking about her.

Had the pretty wife of the rather stolid British army captain come to an awakening that she was throwing away her life and possibilities, and was it possible that she was ready to pay the price to escape from this bondage and fly to the heights of gaiety which she longed for?

Would I be safe in guessing that behind those words of Mrs. Hayne lay a secret longing to throw off the bondage of fidelity to her husband—to accept the necessary ignominy and disgrace which might be the price of the